

Waheba Dais report

My name is Lorenzo Vidino and I am an academic who specializes in Islamism in Europe and North America. Over the past 18 years my research has focused on the mobilization dynamics of jihadist networks in the West; governmental counter-radicalization policies; and the activities of Muslim Brotherhood-inspired organizations in the West.

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I have a law degree from the University of Milan Law School and a doctorate in international relations and security studies with a focus on the Middle East from Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

I am the author of several books and numerous journal articles; I have testified numerous times before the U.S. Congress and other parliaments; advised law enforcement officials around the world; and taught at universities in the U.S. and Europe. I regularly provide commentary to diverse media outlets.

I have served as an expert witness in more than a dozen terrorism trials in the US and I have been qualified to testify on ISIS, radicalization and the use of social media by terrorist groups in several jurisdictions. Upon request of the U.S. Attorney's Office of Eastern District of Wisconsin, I have reviewed various documents relating to the case of Waheba Dais and have written this report. The report is divided in the following sections:

1. A brief history of ISIS
2. The ISIS-related mobilization in America, focusing particularly on social media recruitment techniques
3. The role of Western (and, in particular, American) women in ISIS
4. How the defendant's actions relate to point 2. and 3.

Section 1: A brief history of ISIS

ISIS's roots can be traced back to a Sunni Islamist group founded in 1999 by a Jordanian national called Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹ Initially, the group was named Jama'at al-Tawhid w'al-Jihad and its main aim was to overthrow the Jordanian government. After 2001 the core of the group relocated in Iraq and, after the invasion of that country by U.S forces, it became prominently involved in the insurgency. In 2004 Zarqawi swore bayat (allegiance) to Osama bin Laden, making his group a part of the broader al Qaeda (AQ) network. The group began to be referred to as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

In 2005, Zarqawi joined a coalition of 5 other Sunni Islamist groups forming the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC). Shortly after Zarqawi's death in June 2006, the MSC announced the formation of a new group to be called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which was to rule over the Sunni majority areas of Iraq. The group suffered various setbacks in Iraq and two of its leaders were killed before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took its helm.²

Around 2012, the group found a new life in neighboring Syria, as the country began to be engulfed in a bloody civil war. In 2013 the group announced its new name, which in Arabic is Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham, the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham ("Al Sham" is the region of greater Syria, often referred to as The Levant or, keeping the original name in Arabic Sham). Therefore, the English acronym of the group's name can be both ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Sham or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) or ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant).

In June 2014 Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the creation of a Caliphate in the lands conquered by ISIS. Consequently, the group shortened its name to simply "Islamic State" (IS), indicating that its aims are global and not limited to the region of Iraq and Sham.

At the height of its expansion the group controlled significant parts of territory it had seized from the sovereign states of Iraq and Syria, a land mass roughly the size of France. It chose as its de facto capital the Syrian city of Raqqa. It had a growing number of affiliates worldwide which controlled what the group called wilayet, or provinces.

By early 2015, ISIS, under attack from the US-led international military coalition and a variety of local forces, began to lose momentum. The territory it controlled progressively shrank and, by late 2017, the two largest cities controlled by the group, Raqqa (in Syria) and Mosul (in Iraq), were retaken by forces opposing ISIS. In March 2019, the last sliver of territory controlled by ISIS, the Syrian town of Baghouz, fell to US-supported forces. At this point ISIS no longer controls territory and the Caliphate project can be said to have been defeated.

¹ For an extensive history of ISIS, see Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (NY, Oxford University Press, 2015); and Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (NY, Doubleday, 2015).

² Shahid, Anthony. "Iraqi Insurgent Group Names New Leaders." At War. May 16, 2010. Accessed July 28, 2016. http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/iraqi-insurgent-group-names-new-leaders/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

That is not to say that the group and its supporters have been completely defeated or vanquished. In Iraq and Syria, the group has regressed to being what it was some ten years ago: a skilled insurgent force hiding mostly in desert areas but capable to carrying out terrorist attacks and, at times, military operations throughout the region. Throughout the world, various ISIS wilayet and affiliated groups are still active, and in some cases operating with increasing lethality. Moreover, supporters worldwide, including in the West, still believe in the group's ideology and act in its furtherance in various ways (the Easter Day attacks of April 21, 2019, in Sri Lanka, which took 259 lives and were perpetrated by local ISIS supporters, are just one of the many examples of this dynamic). This is particularly evident online, where the large bubble of ISIS supporters (the so-called "virtual Caliphate") is still extremely active and disseminating the group's ideology.

Section 2: Online recruitment of Americans

While the core of the group and many of its fighters are Iraqis and Syrians, ISIS has benefited also from a major influx of fighters from all over the world (UN estimates put that number between fifty and sixty thousand). ISIS's formation of a self-proclaimed caliphate had a magnetic draw for many young Western Muslims. The scale of this recent mobilization is unprecedented. Even though precise data is virtually impossible to obtain, it is believed that some 5,000 European citizens or residents have become foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.³

The numbers in the U.S., while similarly difficult to measure precisely, are significantly lower than those in most European countries. In June 2015 the FBI stated that "upwards of 200 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict."⁴ A few weeks later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence estimated that more than 250 individuals from the U.S. had traveled or attempted to travel to the conflict area, a few dozens had joined the ranks of ISIS, and some 20 had died.⁵

Moreover, the surge in the number of American foreign fighters is small compared to those who sympathize with and embrace ISIS's ideology. American authorities have consistently said that the popularity of ISIS's propaganda, driven largely by its savvy social media tactics, wholly overshadows that of al Qaeda. Tellingly, in May 2015 FBI Director James Comey spoke of "hundreds, maybe thousands" of ISIS sympathizers and potential recruits across the country, disclosing that the Bureau had related investigations running in all 50 states.⁶ A few months later, in October 2015, Comey revealed that the FBI had a staggering 900 active investigations against homegrown violent extremists.⁷

The profiles of American ISIS sympathizers—from those who merely tout the group's ideology online to those intimately involved in ISIS recruitment, financing, or fighting—are extremely diverse. Ranging from grown men who had flirted with jihadist militancy for over a decade to teenagers who have only recently converted to Islam, from the son of a Boston area police officer to a single mother of two young children, these individuals differ widely in race, age, social class, education, and family background.

Individuals with such diverse backgrounds are unlikely to be motivated by the same factors. Policymakers and academics around the world have formulated a number of explanatory theories about the underlying factors driving people to radicalize. Some focus on structural factors such as political tensions and cultural cleavages, the so-called "root causes" of radicalization. Others stress personal factors such as the shock of a life-changing event. Matt Venhaus captures the diversity of

³ Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), January 26, 2015.

⁴ Testimony of Michael B. Steinbach, Assistant Director of the FBI, *Terrorism Gone Viral: The Attack in Garland, Texas and Beyond*, House Homeland Security Committee, June 3, 2015.

⁵ Barbara Starr, "A Few Dozen Americans' in ISIS Ranks," *CNN*, July 15, 2015.

⁶ Tom Vanden Brook, "ISIL Activity Drives up Pentagon Threat Level," *USA Today*, May 8, 2015.

⁷ Kevin Johnson, "Comey: Feds have Roughly 900 Domestic Probes about Islamic State Operatives," *USA Today*, October 23, 2015.

the individuals attracted to jihadist ideology, categorizing them as revenge seekers, status seekers, identity seekers, and thrill seekers.⁸ But it is clear that these categories are not exhaustive and that, in many cases, an individual might exhibit the characteristics of more than one category. In substance, most experts agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors.

In many cases an underlying sense of sympathy and compassion appeared to play an important role in initially motivating young Americans to become interested and invested in the Syrian conflict. Many were outraged by the appalling violence Bashar al Assad's regime used to suppress the Syrian rebellion and the subsequent inaction on the part of the international community. Pictures and videos capturing the aftermath of civilian massacres perpetrated by the regime, displayed widely in both social and mainstream media, rocked the consciences of many—from those with an existing strong Sunni identity to those who were not Muslim—and led some to take the first steps to militancy.

A major shift began as the anti-regime rebellion in Syria came to be increasingly dominated by militant groups. By the time ISIS formally declared its caliphate in June 2014, the motivations of recruits appeared to revolve more around fulfilling perceived religious obligations, such as performing *hijrah* (migration from a non-Muslim society to a Muslim one, as per the prophet Mohammad's migration from Mecca to Medina) and the opportunity to participate in the creation of a utopian Islamic society.

But ideological motivations are deeply intertwined with, and impossible to separate from, personal motives. The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) observes that those who embrace ISIS's ideology tend to be "disenfranchised individuals seeking ideological, religious and personal fulfillment."⁹ A search for belonging, meaning, and/or identity appears to be a crucial motivator for many Americans (and other Westerners) who embrace ISIS's ideology.

This search for meaning was perfectly encapsulated in the words of Moner Abu Salha, the 22-year-old Floridian who is the first American known to have died in a suicide mission in Syria on behalf of Jabhat al Nusra. "I lived in America," stated Abu Salha in a 2014 video. "I know how it is. You have all the fancy amusement parks and the restaurants and the food and all this crap and the cars. You think you're happy. You're not happy. You're never happy. I was never happy. I was always sad and depressed. Life sucked."¹⁰ In contrast, he described life fighting in Syria as "the best I've ever lived."¹¹

Despite coming from a quite different background, a fellow American who made the journey to Syria has reportedly displayed a similar malaise. Ariel Bradley was born in an underprivileged family in the Chattanooga suburb of Hixson. Bradley was homeschooled by her evangelical Christian mother until she rebelled and left home as a teenager. According to friends interviewed

⁸ Colonel John M. "Matt" Venhaus, U.S. Army, "Why Youth Join al-Qaeda," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2010.

⁹ Testimony of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center, *Countering Violent Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror*, House Homeland Security Committee, February 11, 2015.

¹⁰ Mona El-Naggar and Quynhanh Do, "Video Released of U.S. Bomber in Syria," *New York Times*, July 31, 2014.

¹¹ Ibid.

for her extensive profile in *BuzzFeed News*, Bradley spent the following years wandering in search of something.¹²

“She was definitely always looking for love,” said a former roommate “always looking for that sense of belonging.” Another friend recalled Bradley’s “clearly segmented life”: “When I first met her she was a Christian, and then she was a socialist, and then she was an atheist, and then a Muslim. As far as I could tell it was always in relation to whatever guy she was interested in, so if she meets a guy that’s an atheist then she’s an atheist, falls into that for a year. Then the guy leaves and she meets somebody new, and it starts all over again.... It seemed like whatever guy she was with, she would just crawl into his skin and kind of become him.”¹³

At one point Bradley fell in love with a Muslim patron of the pizza parlor where she used to work. To get close to him, she converted to Islam. While things never worked out with the original love interest, Bradley began frequenting Muslim marriage websites where, in August 2011, she met an Iraqi man living in Sweden. Shortly thereafter the two married and had a child. Likely under the influence of her husband, Bradley’s faith became increasingly conservative and militant. In early 2014 the couple left for Syria, where they have reportedly been living in ISIS-controlled territory. Bradley is active online, particularly on Twitter and Instagram, where she discusses her life and praises ISIS. In the immediate aftermath of the Chattanooga attacks, which killed five military personnel in her hometown, she tweeted: “*in sha Allah* [God willing] this will make the camps of *Emaan* [believers] and *Kuffr* [non-believers] known within Chattanooga.”¹⁴

It is tempting to caricature Bradley as a naïve girl with personal problems whose jihadist trajectory is the outcome of an unfortunate childhood. It is also easy to assume that her actions were driven by a quest for a romantic partner. But, even in the most extreme cases, multiple factors contribute to an individual’s decision. Her friend’s analysis highlights this dynamic: “Be it religion, be it a man, be it a marriage, be it a child, be it ISIS, Ariel was always looking for something to define herself, an identity to cling to.”¹⁵ Given her particular pattern of behavior, it is likely that Bradley might have accepted other extremist ideologies, if circumstances allowed, so long as they satiated her hunger for community, love, and identity.

Still, it is difficult to fully comprehend the complex mental processes that led Bradley, like other young Americans, to embark on such an extreme journey to the ISIS caliphate. What is apparent is that ISIS and its propaganda machine have been particularly adept at exploiting the emotions, needs, and weaknesses of young Americans, irrespective of their demographic backgrounds.

The Role of Social Media

Extremist groups inspired by a range of ideologies have embraced the internet for a variety of purposes. As a 2009 report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at London’s King’s College observes: “The Internet can be used by extremists to illustrate and reinforce

¹² Ellie Hall, “How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride,” *Buzzfeed News*, July 20, 2015.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hall, “How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride,” *Buzzfeed News*, July 20, 2015.

ideological messages and/or narratives. Through the Internet, potential recruits can gain near-instantaneous access to visually powerful video and imagery which appear to substantiate the extremists' political claims.... The Internet makes it easier to join and integrate into more formal organizations. It provides a comparatively risk-free way for potential recruits to find like-minded individuals and network amongst them, enabling them to reach beyond an isolated core group of conspirators.... It creates a new social environment in which otherwise unacceptable views and behaviour are normalised. Surrounded by other radicals, the Internet becomes a virtual 'echo chamber' in which the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support."¹⁶

Western governments tend to agree on the importance of the internet in radicalization processes. The dynamic has been described with clarity by the Netherlands' domestic intelligence agency (AIVD) in an extensive report that calls the Internet "the turbocharger of the jihadi movement." "There is a large group of Muslims," argues the report "mostly young people, in non-Muslim western countries, who feel isolated within the societies in which they live. Because these youngsters see their future in the West, unlike their parents, while at the same time experiencing a strong element of distrust for Western society, they are looking for their own identity and for a position to adopt in Western society.... When hunting for answers to these questions, they may end up in an environment with which they are familiar and which is easily accessible, namely the Internet. Not only can they find a great deal of information there, but they can also become part of a virtual (Muslim) community, exchanging ideas and blowing off steam by expressing their frustration with other like-minded individuals who share their fate."¹⁷

Officials in the U.S. have expressed similar concerns. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, titled *The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland*, observes: "The spread of radical—especially Salafi—Internet sites, increasingly aggressive anti-U.S. rhetoric and actions, and the growing number of radical, self-generating cells in Western countries indicate that the radical and violent segment of the West's Muslim population is expanding, including in the United States. The arrest and prosecution by law enforcement of a small number of violent Islamic extremists inside the U.S.—who are becoming more connected ideologically, virtually, and/or in a physical sense to the global extremist movement—points to the possibility that others may become sufficiently radicalized that they will view the use of violence here as legitimate."¹⁸

In May 2008, the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs published a report titled *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat* in which the committee warns about the increased frequency with which U.S.-based militants are active online.¹⁹ A 2010 report by NCTC contends that "the Internet and related information technologies—such as Web forums, blogs, social networking sites, and e-mail—that

¹⁶ Tim Stevens and Peter R. Neumann, "Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action," ICSR, March 16, 2009, p. 12.

¹⁷ Netherlands' Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (Ministry of International Affairs and Kingdom Relations), "Jihadis and the Internet," Netherlands' National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, February 2007, p. 91.

¹⁸ United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Intelligence Council, "The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland," *National Intelligence Estimate*, July 2007.

¹⁹ U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (HSGAC), "Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat," May 8, 2008.

serve as platforms for extremist propaganda and discourse can enable and advance the radicalization process and help mobilize individuals who may not be geographically near key extremist figures or significant events.”²⁰

U.S. officials have repeatedly highlighted how ISIS uses social media to reach a significantly wider audience much faster than any group in the past. “ISIL blends traditional media platforms, glossy photos, in-depth articles, and social media campaigns that can go viral in a matter of seconds,” argued FBI Director Comey in a July 2015 testimony before the U.S. Senate. “No matter the format, the message of radicalization spreads faster than we imagined just a few years ago.”²¹ He continued, “Social media has allowed groups, such as ISIL, to use the Internet to spot and assess potential recruits. With the widespread horizontal distribution of social media, terrorists can identify vulnerable individuals of all ages in the United States—spot, assess, recruit, and radicalize—either to travel or to conduct a homeland attack. The foreign terrorist now has direct access into the United States like never before.”²²

Comey further elaborated on the novelty of ISIS social media use: “Your grandfather’s al Qaeda, if you wanted to get propaganda, you had to go find it. Find where *Inspire* magazine was and read it. If you want to talk to a terrorist, you had to send an email into *Inspire* magazine and hope that Anwar al Awlaki would email you back. Now all that’s in your pocket. All that propaganda is in your pocket, and the terrorist is in your pocket. You can have direct communication with a terrorist in Syria all day and night, and so the effect of that—especially on troubled minds and kids—it works! It’s buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz. It’s the constant feed, the constant touching, so it’s very, very different and much more effective at radicalizing than your grandfather’s al Qaeda model.”²³

The Echo Chamber

U.S. authorities estimate that several thousand Americans consume ISIS propaganda online, creating what it has been described as a “radicalization echo chamber.”²⁴ American ISIS activists and sympathizers are active on a variety of platforms, from open forums like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Tumblr to more discrete messaging applications such as Kik, Telegram, surespot and the dark web.

While American ISIS supporters tend to be male, female ISIS supporters are disproportionately active online, a space where the gender gap is less marked.²⁵ American ISIS online supporters can be broadly divided into two sets: those who locate themselves in Syria and Iraq and those still in

²⁰ Similar findings were reached in this report. See also National Counterterrorism Center, “Radicalization Dynamics: A Primer,” September 2010, p. 18; HSGAC, “Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism,” February 16, 2012.

²¹ Testimony of James B. Comey, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Counterterrorism, Counterintelligence, and the Challenges of “Going Dark,”* July 8, 2015.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ryan J. Reilly, “If You’re Trying To Join ISIS Through Twitter, The FBI Probably Knows About It,” *Huffington Post*, July 9, 2015.

²⁴ Pierre Thomas, Mike Levine, Jack Date and Jack Cloherty, “ISIS: Potentially ‘Thousands’ of Online Followers Inside US Homeland, FBI Chief Warns,” *ABC News*, May 7, 2015. The term has also been used by Assistant Attorney General John Carlin: United States Department of Justice, “Assistant Attorney General John P. Carlin Delivers Remarks on Domestic Terrorism at an Event Co-Sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the George Washington University Center for Cyber and Homeland Security’s Program on Extremism,” October 14, 2015.

²⁵ Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, From Retweets to Raqqa

America but aspiring to assist ISIS in a number of ways. Those in the former group often maintain their network of friends in the U.S. after arriving in ISIS territory. They post near real-time updates of ISIS-led attacks and life in the caliphate, encouraging their fellow Americans to make the trek and, at times, scolding their real-world and online friends for their lack of commitment to the cause.

A significant number of American ISIS supporters use avatars of black flags, lions, and green birds.²⁶ A particularly clever account uses a picture of the Detroit Lions, combining a distinctly American pride in an NFL team and the popular Islamic symbol of bravery very frequently used by ISIS supporters. Images, quotes, and links to lectures of the deceased radical cleric Anwar al Awlaki are favorites of the American ISIS scene. Increasingly photos of other Americans who have been arrested on terrorism charges, killed waging *jihad* abroad, or were responsible for homegrown terrorist attacks are used as avatars.

As with many online communities, participants in the American ISIS online scene exhibit distinct styles, roles, personalities, and degrees of commitment, which often fluctuate over time. Reflecting these dynamics, their accounts can be divided into three categories: nodes, amplifiers, and shout-outs.

The **nodes** are the leading voices that enjoy a prominent status within the larger community and are the primary content creators for the network. A group of two or three clustered users will often swap comedic memes, news articles, and official ISIS tweets, allowing them to pool followers and more easily spread content both to new audiences and throughout their network.

Amplifiers largely do not generate new content but rather retweet and “favorite” material from popular users. Ultimately, because they post little, if any, original content, it is often unclear whether these accounts correspond to real-life ISIS sympathizers or are programmed to post automatically.

Finally, **shout-out** accounts are a unique innovation and vital to the survival of the ISIS online scene. They primarily introduce new, pro-ISIS accounts to the community and promote newly created accounts of previously suspended users, allowing them to quickly regain their pre-suspension status. Although they tweet little substantive content, shout-out accounts tend to have the largest followings in the online landscape and therefore play a pivotal role in the resilience of ISIS’s online community.

Communicating primarily in English, American ISIS supporters discuss a wide range of topics, from open support for gruesome acts of terror to boringly benign banter. When ISIS releases propaganda materials in foreign languages (namely Arabic), members of the American community often ask the larger online ISIS echo chamber for translation assistance. Popular content for American ISIS supporters’ posts include photos, videos, and discussion of human rights abuses committed by the Syrian, American, Israeli, and various Arab governments; news of ISIS’s military victories and provision of social services; photos of deceased ISIS militants

²⁶ The term “green bird” indicates is a status one reaches when he or she dies (becomes a *shaheed*, or martyr) and reaches *jannah*, or heaven. It is a scriptural reference from a *hadith*, or reported saying from the prophet Mohammad, that celebrates the virtues of martyrdom. Jihadists term fallen comrades “green birds” to eulogize them as pious, faithful Muslims.

commemorating their status as martyrs; and mocking of Western leaders' perceived weakness and ignorance.

On occasion, American ISIS supporters exploit hashtags related to U.S. policies and political movements. For example, some tried interjecting in the #BlackLivesMatter conversation in an attempt to bolster their support among African American Muslims and spread their propaganda to unsuspecting Americans of all backgrounds. Using Black Lives Matter-related hashtags, American ISIS supporters and globally based ISIS recruiters alike have sought to capitalize on unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, trying to tailor their U.S.-targeted propaganda to resonate with segments of the African American community.²⁷

American accounts, like the larger ISIS echo chamber, tend not to tolerate dissent and silence attempts at nuance. Muslim religious leaders, particularly those living in the West, who condemn ISIS are routinely dismissed as “coconuts,” a derogatory term used to insult those accused of denying their Muslim identity. Many U.S.-based Muslim scholars and activists, even those from conservative backgrounds, are subject to routine death threats.

American ISIS supporters also act as “spotters” for future recruits. Our researchers observed real-time cases of recently converted Americans pulled into the ISIS echo chamber. In one case the seemingly naïve individual posted general questions about religion, to which ISIS supporters quickly responded in a calm and authoritative manner. After a few weeks, the accounts of hardened ISIS supporters slowly introduced increasingly ardent views into the conversation. The new recruit was then invited to continue the conversion privately, often via Twitter's Direct Message feature or on other private messaging platforms such as surespot.

In substance, social media has created the opportunity for ISIS supporters, including those based far away from ISIS territory and with no operational connections to the group, to make themselves useful to the group in various ways. Some entail more direct, immediate forms of support such as fundraising or providing concrete information on how to join the group or carry out attacks on its behalf. Others entail less direct (but that is not to say less important) forms of support, such as disseminating the group's propaganda, introducing new individuals to it or connecting like-minded individuals so to reinforce their beliefs and commitment to the cause.

Indeed, ISIS's ability to directly and constantly reach Americans through social media has manifested itself in a number of ways: 1) groomers: triggering or advancing their radicalization process; 2) travel agents: helping them mobilize to leave for Syria to join the group; and 3) devil on the shoulder inciting them to carry out attacks in America.

Groomers

ISIS recruiters, whether formally affiliated with the group located in the territory of the self-proclaimed Caliphate or simply sympathizers with no official affiliation to it and operating anywhere in the world, have systematically used a variety of social media platforms to contact, radicalize and recruit potential new members and sympathizers of the group. Methods vary, but recruiters are active on all sorts of online platforms, from those where individuals that have already expressed some degree of sympathy towards ISIS and its ideology to others that have not even

²⁷ Justine Drennan, “Islamic State Supporters Urge Baltimore Rioters to Join Extremist Cause,” *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2015.

remote connections to ISIS or even Islam or politics. But, using tactics that, in the case of some of the weakest targets, mirror those of online paedophiles, recruiters engage their targets in conversations; establish personal and trust-based connections to them, introduce them to or, in the case of subjects who have already discovered it, further their knowledge of ISIS ideology; respond to their targets' queries and doubts; and motivate them to deepen their knowledge and interest in ISIS.

An archetypal case of ISIS's online radicalization and recruitment campaign was chronicled in an illuminating *New York Times* story on "Alex," a 23-year-old girl from rural Washington state.²⁸ Alex lived with her grandparents from an early age, after her mother lost custody due to drug addiction. A college dropout who, in her own words, lived "in the middle of nowhere" and had no connection to Islam, Alex was motivated by a "horrified curiosity" to seek out ISIS supporters after reading news of the execution of American journalist James Foley.²⁹

Within several months, she was exchanging messages and conversing over Skype with various ISIS-linked recruiters.³⁰ Over time, Alex, who had previously expressed a desire to "live a faith more fully," was meticulously groomed online, her new friends showering her with money, books, gift cards, and chocolate. She soon converted to Islam and slowly embraced ISIS's ideology. Her new friends offered Alex a previously lacking sense of belonging: hours after declaring her conversion online, the number of individuals following her on Twitter doubled, prompting her to tweet, "I actually have brothers and sisters. I am crying."³¹ Alex began to live what the *Times* categorizes as a double life. In public, she continued teaching Sunday school classes at her grandparents' church. But, behind closed doors, she was a full-fledged believer in ISIS's ideology.

An ISIS supporter from the U.K.—who turned out to be a married middle-aged father with a criminal record of multiple arrests—spent hours each day grooming Alex. He eventually told her that it is a sin for Muslims to live among non-believers, and extended an invitation for her to travel to Austria, marry a 45-year-old ISIS supporter, and then move to Syria.

Realizing that Alex was spending an inordinate amount of time on her computer, her grandmother confiscated her electronics and confronted her online contacts via Skype. With her double life exposed, Alex promised to stop communications with ISIS sympathizers and allowed her grandmother to change her Twitter and email passwords. But the companionship her like-minded friends provided was apparently too good to give up. The *Times* claims that, despite her promise, Alex has continued to be active in the online ISIS scene.³²

Travel Agents

In addition to helping radicalize individuals, online ISIS supporters have been instrumental in providing both advice and logistical support to Americans attempting to travel to Syria to join ISIS. An example of this dynamic played out in October 2014, when three siblings from Chicago were stopped at O'Hare International Airport on their way to Syria. The journey had been meticulously planned by the eldest sibling, 19-year-old engineering student Mohammed Hamzah

²⁸ Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS and the Lonely Young American," *NYT*, July 27, 2015.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Khan. Khan, a graduate of an Islamic school in the Chicago suburbs, had been active online and met a man known as Abu Qaqa on Twitter, whom he soon communicated with using personal messaging platforms such as Kik and Whatsapp.³³ According to authorities, it was Abu Qaqa who provided Khan with the phone number of an individual to call upon landing in Turkey. Khan's 17-year-old sister had also been active online, trying to find ways to travel to Syria. Using the Twitter name "Umm Bara," she communicated with an English-speaking ISIS fighter who went by the name Abu Hud—known on Twitter as the "Paladin of Jihad"—and popular as result of his Tumblr series #DustyFeet, a de facto travel guide for would-be recruits.³⁴ A search of the siblings' home found a step-by-step guide to crossing the Turkish border, contact information for four individuals involved in smuggling ISIS volunteers, including Abu Qaqa, and handwritten farewell letters addressed to their parents.³⁵

Devil on the Shoulder

"Devil on the shoulder" is an expression commonly used to describe ISIS online sympathizers in their efforts to push their online interlocutors to carry out attacks, particularly if they are located on US territory. Starting in late 2014, when ISIS came under attack from a US-led military coalition, ISIS's message to sympathizers worldwide shifted. While before the attack the emphasis was on convincing them to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the ranks of the Caliphate, by late 2014 it shifted to exhorting them to carry out attacks in Western countries to exact revenge against the anti-ISIS coalition. ISIS sympathizers began pushing, in some cases even egging on, fellow ISIS sympathizers to carry out attacks in America and in other Western countries. In many cases these exhortations were accompanied by specifics on targets and methods.

A quintessential example of this dynamic is the case of Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi, who attacked the Muhammad Art Exhibit and Cartoon Contest in Garland, Texas, on May 3, 2015. A few months before the attack Simpson, who had been involved in jihadist activities for over a decade, became an active participant in the community of U.S.-based ISIS sympathizers on social media. Simpson also made contact with a well-known British foreign fighter, Abu Hussain al Britani, and Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan (a.k.a. Mujahid Miski), a prominent Somali-American English-speaking propagandist.³⁶ Ten days before the attack, Miski posted about the Garland event with a clear exhortation: "The brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It's time for the brothers in the #US to do their part."³⁷

Simpson, via a Twitter account with the username "Shariah is Light" and an avatar of the late al Qaeda propagandist Anwar al Awlaki, responded to Miski's call to arms, publicly asking his friend in Somalia to "dm" (Direct Message, a private message on Twitter) him.³⁸ Simpson and Soofi then drove from Arizona to Garland in a vehicle loaded with assault rifles, body armor, and hundreds of rounds of ammunition. Prior to the attack, Simpson tweeted a final time, using a hashtag #texasattack. The hashtag was quickly picked up by Abu Hussain al Britani and circulated

³³ Janet Reitman, "The Children of ISIS," *The Rolling Stone*, March 25, 2015.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *United States of America v. Mohammed Hamzah Khan*, Criminal Complaint (October 6, 2014).

³⁶ Scott Shane, "Texas Attacker Left Trail of Extremist Ideas on Twitter," *NYT*, May 5, 2015.

³⁷ Jim Sciutto, Pamela Brown, Paul Cruickshank and Paul Murphy, Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists, *CNN*, May 5, 2015.

³⁸ Rita Katz, "The Power of a Tweet: Elton Simpson and the #TexasAttack," *SITE Intelligence Group (SITE)*, May 5, 2015.

throughout the pro-ISIS community on Twitter in an effort to encourage others to commit similar acts.³⁹

³⁹ Katz, “The Power of a Tweet” *SITE*, May 5, 2015.

Section 3: Women and ISIS

Despite ISIS's barbaric abuse of women the movement has attracted an unprecedented number of Western women. Questions such as "*Why do Western women go?*" and "*What purpose do they serve within the organization?*" are tough to answer. Western assumptions and, at times, misconceptions about the intersection of gender and Islam inadvertently bias many analyses on the role of women in ISIS. Furthermore, articulating the nuance of women's contributions to jihad and fully capturing their agency within an organization notorious for its gender-based violence is difficult. These fundamental challenges have led to news producers, policymakers, and even academics to vastly oversimplifying the issue. Reductionists commonly refer to Western women who migrate to ISIS-held territory as "jihadi brides," even if they are traveling purely by their own choice. They often typecast as either a 'naïve victim' or a 'fanatic agitator'; if the woman is neither, she becomes a victim of circumstance.⁴⁰ Needless to say, the reality of this phenomenon is far more complex.

At present, ISIS's stance on the role of both Western and non-Western women is broadly consistent with other Salafi-jihadi groups. In this respect, all women remain limited to support roles in most circumstances. While few texts address the role of women within ISIS-controlled territory, a document published by the media wing of the Al-Khanssaa Brigade, titled "Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study," widely speaks to the role of women in the movement.⁴¹ Although the Arabic-language manifesto was likely produced for women in the Arab world, it offers credible insight regarding the organization's stance on gender roles. The second section of the treatise, for example, focuses exclusively on the idealized life of women within ISIS-controlled territory, but the perspective offered likely extends to the prescribed roles of Western women.⁴²

As suggested in the manifesto, Western women's most prominent role in ISIS is that of a supportive wife and mother to the next generation of jihadists. In this capacity, women are responsible for nurturing the domestic sphere and their energy relegated to tasks such as cooking, caretaking, and cleaning. When their husbands are not on the front lines, women sometimes host social engagements or tend to the wounded. Concerning procreation and child rearing, many Western women do so with the distinct aim of creating the next generation of mujahideen. In one instance, using the *kunya* Umm Layth, female ISIS recruit Aqsa Mahmood explains that women should aspire to be strong mothers and wives rather than pursuing the role of a martyr.⁴³ Mahmood notes, "You may gain more *ajr* [reward] by spending years of sleepless nights by being a mother and raising your children with the right intentions and for the sake of Allah than by doing a martyrdom operation."⁴⁴ In keeping with this imagery, women's contributions to the supposed

⁴⁰Edwin Bakker and Seran de Leede, "European Female Jihadists in Syria: Exploring an Under-Researched Topic," *ICCT*, April 2015, 4.

⁴¹ "Women of the Islamic State - A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," February 2015, Translation and analysis by the Quilliam Foundation.

⁴² "Women of the Islamic State - A Manifesto on Women by the Al-Khanssaa Brigade," February 2015, Translation and analysis by the Quilliam Foundation.

⁴³ Examples showcased in Institute for Strategic Dialogue, *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*. January 2015.

⁴⁴ Examples showcased in Institute for Strategic Dialogue, *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*. January 2015.

Caliphate are usually depicted through photos of their children. Isa Dare, for example, the son of Khadijah Dare, a British migrant, was reportedly featured in an ISIS propaganda video around January 2016.⁴⁵ Furthermore, social media accounts belonging to the Western women of ISIS often express jubilation at raising “Dawlah cubs,”⁴⁶ share photos of children alongside weapons, or holding up a pointed index finger, ISIL’s symbol for unity.

Although being a wife and mother to the ‘cubs of the Caliphate’ takes center stage in the self-declared Islamic State, many women assume additional support roles. In this capacity, women make tangible contributions to the movement as fundraisers, facilitators, and proactive members of the community. There is also evidence that Western women can absorb more professional responsibilities, including becoming doctors, nurses, and teachers. On Tumblr, BirdOfJannah responded to a question about the tasks women can perform in ISIS-held territory, explaining, “We have sisters, who used to work as teacher, nurse, tailor and etc. If you have an [sic] skills, you can still apply it here. We also have sisters who are conducting home-schooling.”⁴⁷

On top of their contributions in the physical, material sense, Western women serve as influential propaganda disseminators and recruiters. ISIS’s propaganda channels display a strong command of the symbolic value imbued by the mere involvement of Western women. Furthermore, Western women living in the self-proclaimed Caliphate serve as some of the most prominent promoters of ISIS’s ideology, crucial to accessing Western audiences, highlighting ISIS’s alleged superiority, and convincing Muslim woman of their obligation to participate in *jihad*.⁴⁸ Despite their inability to physically perpetrate violence within ISIL territory, women’s social media posts suggest that they do not refrain from violent rhetoric online. Under the *kunya* @ZumarulJannah, Hoda Muthana, one of the American women living in ISIS-held territory, tweeted, “hats off to the mujs in Paris,”⁴⁹ praising the January 7, 2015, attack on Charlie Hebdo. In similar cases, symbols of ISIS’s strength are reinforced in graphic and mirthless language divulging Western women’s desire to weaken the West.

The support roles women assume are not passive with the ideological framework of jihad as conceptualized by ISIS. Within the jihadist mindset, these domestic and mundane tasks are absolutely necessary; indeed, “the very women who describe their desire to fight also emphasize the importance of their domestic role.”⁵⁰ In a report on European female jihad in ISIS, researchers highlight the role of European women specifically, explaining “women can play important, indirect roles in jihad without actually picking up arms.”⁵¹ Their behind-the-scenes, “behind the battlefield,” contributions include disseminating propaganda, financing the organization through

⁴⁵<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/12080134/Jihadi-Junior-son-of-female-British-fanatic-with-links-to-Lee-Rigby-killers.html>

⁴⁶<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/families-of-mississippi-isis-honeymooners-stunned/>

⁴⁷ Examples showcased in Institute for Strategic Dialogue, *Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS*. January 2015. Bird of Jannah, <http://diary-of-a-muhajirah.tumblr.com> [last accessed 28 November 2014]

⁴⁸ Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, “The Western Muhajirat of ISIS,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, January 2015, 38:7, 504.

⁴⁹ Screenshot of Umm Jihad @ZumarulJannah, Twitter, January 7, 2015.

⁵⁰ Carolyn Hoyle et al., “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, January 2015, 31.

⁵¹ Bakker and de Leede, 10.

fundraising, and helping soldiers prepare for combat.⁵² It unwise and dangerous to dismiss women's actions as passive or apolitical because women are an important cog in the social wheel.

Despite the aforementioned limitations and the integral auxiliary roles women adopt, several Western women have articulated their interest and willingness to fight on social media accounts such as Twitter and Tumblr. One especially graphic piece of evidence comes from Umm Ubaydah, a Western woman reportedly living in ISIS-controlled territory. One on occasion, she posted on a social media platform asking Allah for permission to kill U.S. soldiers, whom she called *kanzeer* [pigs], "with their own weapons."⁵³ In another tweet, Umm Ubaydah stated, "I wonder if I can pull a Mulan and enter the battle field [sic]."⁵⁴ Similarly, Aqsa Mahmood grapples with questions regarding women's inability to fight under the *kunya* Umm Layth. On her blog, she bluntly said that "for the time being *Qitaal* [fighting] is not *fardhayn* [a compulsory religious duty] upon the sisters... For the sisters its [sic] completely impossible for the now. *InshaaAllah* [God willing] in future."⁵⁵

In short, the utility of the Western women of ISIS is undeniable. Their roles in the so-called Caliphate unveil a considerable range of engagement within the ISIS's community, though the metric for their varied contributions must be adjusted when evaluating the extent and significance of their involvement. Western women act as wives and mothers as well as propaganda disseminators, online recruiters, and fundraisers. They do not fight like their male counterparts, but there is a distinct possibility that their contribution could change in the future (most likely as suicide bombers, which many jihadists groups have already employed). Western women remain a potent force in sustaining the jihadi ideology, but many have expressed the desire to assume more prominent roles in the future. It is also important to note that Western women in ISIL-held territory are only one small part of the larger transnational movement. Within the United States, for example, women have disseminated pro-ISIL content, facilitated connections, and garnered material resources for ISIL fighters in Syria. Outside of ISIL-controlled territory, female sympathizers in the West continue to engage with the movement; intent on contributing to and progressing its ideology perhaps until they, too, can make *Hijrah* to Syria.

⁵² Bakker and de Leede, 9.

⁵³ Carolyn Hoyle et al., "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, January 2015, 30.

⁵⁴ Umm Ubaydah, @FlamessOfWar, October 2014, <https://twitter.com/FlamessOfwar>

⁵⁵ Umm Layth, April 2014, <http://fa-tubalilghuraba.tumblr.com>

Section 4: the defendant's actions

From an analysis of the evidence in the case I was given access to⁵⁶, it is clear to me that the defendant engaged over an extended time in several behaviors that are not just those of a simple ISIS sympathizer but, rather, of an ISIS recruiter. In the de-centralized mode widely used by ISIS, any individual that engages in the behaviors adopted by the defendant provides an important service to the organization. The defendant, in fact, performed a variety of activities that were extremely useful to ISIS in advancing its goals, perfectly fitting into the model adopted by the organization. The methods and tactics she used in performing these activities are typical of an online ISIS recruiter, and arguably are typical of a fairly skilled and experienced one. The defendant's charismatic persona online made her actions even more effective.

In the previous section I identified three roles that online ISIS recruiters typically adopt: groomers, travel agents and devil on the shoulder. The defendant repeatedly engaged in all three actions. More in detail:

She consistently acted as a groomer, constantly engaging with several interlocutors online to convince them of the goodness of ISIS's message. Using textbook ISIS online supporter tactics, she disseminated propaganda materials to her list of contacts from a variety of platforms and added her own commentary. This kind of activity is aimed at increasing the knowledge of and sustaining the ideological commitment of her interlocutors.

Radicalizing other individuals, bringing them to embrace the cause of ISIS, is one of the core activities of virtually all online ISIS sympathizers. But the defendant seemed to be particularly effective at it. Her success is not so much proven by the countless hours she spent online or the many accounts on various platforms she used. Rather, it is demonstrated by the fact that she had a following, a receptive audience that listened and looked up to her. Nothing demonstrates this more than the fact that 17 of her online friends pledged allegiance to ISIS in response to one of her post. This is highly indicative of a level of influence that is substantially greater than most U.S. online sympathizers.

The defendant also functioned as a "travel agent," connecting individuals she interacted with online with people she claimed to know in Syria. In one conversation, for example, she said to her contact AK that she knew an ISIS military trainer in Raqqa, then the capital of the self-proclaimed Caliphate. Having this kind of connection is not very common among US ISIS sympathizers and is therefore a crucially important feature that sets her apart from most of her peers. It is a particularly important asset because an aspiring ISIS member who sought to leave the United States to travel and join ISIS would, in most cases, necessitate a contact within the organization, somebody who could vouch for them. Establishing that contact was, for somebody located in America, a very difficult task and therefore the defendant's claim to have such contacts made her particularly sought after and influential among US ISIS sympathizers.

⁵⁶ These include all officially translated social-media materials; the FBI's technical analysis of the defendant's posts providing instructions to make ricin and TNT; all reports of the defendant's communications with an undercover online agent; the factual excerpt from the defendant's pre-sentence report.

But more than anything else, the defendant acted as a quintessential “devil on the shoulder,” as she repeatedly incited her contacts to carry out attacks. In doing so she a) used original ISIS propaganda to back up her words b) suggested specific targets c) provided detailed instructions on how to do so, disseminating very effective manuals she obtained from bonified jihadist sources. Once again, her words were particularly powerful because coming from somebody who had acquired a certain stature within the US online pro-ISIS community.

The defendant seemed to be quite aware of her position of influence. In fact, she felt comfortable giving advice, admonishing and directing several of her contacts---a role that not everybody in the community would or could take. She even penned a “book” in which she provides instructions to fellow ISIS sympathizers on how to behave to support the organization. Only a person that sees herself as authoritative would do so and it is telling that her implicit assertion of authority was accepted by many of her interlocutors.